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XXXIV.—*Letters, Extracts, and Notes.*

Breeding-habits of the Cuckoo.

SIR,—Major Meiklejohn's paper on the breeding-habits of the Cuckoo has been prepared under such disadvantages, that it seems an ungracious task to criticise it, but as you have already published several communications on the subject, may I be permitted to offer a few remarks?

In the first place, although Dr. Rey's work is exhaustively analysed, the important papers by V. Čapek (*Ornith. Jahrbuch*, 1896, pp. 41, 102, 146, and 165) are apparently unknown to the writer, and this fact alone renders Major Meiklejohn's *résumé* of the whole subject imperfect. He has also overlooked the articles on the Cuckoo by Mr. F. B. Kirkman and myself which appeared in the '*British Bird Book.*' This I venture to think renders his list of fosterers (p. 222) unrepresentative of the present state

of our knowledge of the subject. Although the species mentioned are stated to breed in England, we are not informed whether the cases referred to actually took place in the British Isles. In five or six cases the records are apparently drawn from Continental sources, and in some instances refer to subspecific forms which do not breed with us at all. Altogether 58 species of fosterers are mentioned in 'The Ibis' list, but though this number is approximately correct, great alterations would have to be made before it could be taken as accurately representing the status of British foster-parents. For example, the Marsh-Warbler is included among the species commonly selected as fosterers, although only about half a dozen instances are known in which this event has taken place in England. The Song-Thrush is rightly classed among the occasional fosterers, but I am aware of at least eleven instances in which Cuckoos' eggs have been found in the nests of this species. I shall be glad of any reliable evidence that Cuckoos' eggs have been found in the nests of Magpie, Jay, Stock-Dove, Turtle-Dove, or Little Grebe anywhere in the British Isles, and further information would also be most acceptable in the case of the Goldfinch, Pied Flycatcher, Tree-Creeper, and Jackdaw. On the other hand, the omission from the list of Reed-Bunting, Cirl Bunting, Ring-Ouzel, and Dartford Warbler, all of which have been proved to act as fosterers in the British Isles, is inexplicable.

Bare lists of foster-parents at the present day are practically useless, and have no scientific value unless evidence is given in the case of all species previously unrecorded or included on dubious authority.

I venture to think that the whole argument on p. 213 is based on a misunderstanding. When Dr. Rey wrote that there is no proof that a fresh Cuckoo's egg is laid on the day it is found, and that it may possibly have been laid one or several days previously, he merely implied that the egg might have been lying in the nest for two or three days before its discovery. There is no reason to believe that he thought the Cuckoo stored its eggs in a larder, either on

the branches of trees or elsewhere, and doled them out as required ! The evidence on behalf of this theory (p. 210) is so extremely flimsy, and contrary to the experience of all who have witnessed the oviposition of the Cuckoo, that it scarcely needs refutation.

It seems hardly fair to pass judgment on Dr. Rey's claim to be able to assign eggs to specific females on the grounds stated on pp. 195-197. It is of course perfectly true that the Tree-Sparrow lays eggs of different types in the same clutch, but it is equally true that the eggs of such species as the Tree-Pipit and the Red-backed Shrike are almost always true to type in the clutch. Moreover, no account is taken of the fact (which is admitted on p. 216) that each Cuckoo deposits her eggs in a restricted locality. To separate the eggs of two or three pairs of Red-backed Shrikes or Tree-Pipits from one district is not as a rule at all a difficult task. To assign each egg even from a small colony of Guillemots in two consecutive years is not in any way a parallel case, although it may frequently be done with absolute certainty in the case of individual birds. The thirty-four hen Cuckoos to which Dr. Rey refers in the country round Leipzig, did not range over the same ground, but had in each case a special district, although no doubt the boundaries of adjacent hens overlapped from time to time. Having had the advantage of inspecting Dr. Rey's wonderful series, I unhesitatingly assert that though occasionally he may have been misled by the similarity in the eggs of two females in adjoining areas, his claim would be upheld by any unbiassed judge in the vast majority of cases. Inferences drawn from the necessarily brief descriptions of the type or measurements alone apart from colour and markings are necessarily fallacious. No reference is made to the remarkable fact that the variability of British Cuckoos' eggs is considerably less than that of Continental specimens. Particulars of the supposed blue Cuckoo's egg referred to by Dr. A. G. Butler (*antea*, p. 459) as having been taken by the late Mr. W. Borrer will be found in the 'Birds of Sussex,' p. 167, but there is no evidence in this or other supposed

cases that the weight of the shell was ascertained, and as this is the only conclusive test in such cases, the occurrence of the blue type of Cuckoo's egg in England cannot at present be regarded as established.

Yours truly,

Appleton Rectory,  
Abingdon.

F. C. R. JOURDAIN.

2 August, 1917.

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#### Brown Jackdaws.

SIR,—I read with very great interest, in 'The Ibis' for July last, Capt. Sladen's account of the birds he had met with in Macedonia. I was particularly interested in the account of the curious variety of the Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula collaris*, which he describes as having a dull rusty-red coloration extending over the primary, secondary, and tertiary wing-feathers.

In 1903 I spent a most enjoyable holiday in Algeria. On the 14th of March I was looking over the gorge of the Rummel at Constantine and admiring the great wealth of bird-life therein, thousands of Lesser Kestrels, Egyptian Vultures, Rock-Doves, and Jackdaws constantly flying backwards and forwards in the glorious sunlight; at the time I noted that there were strange Jackdaws of a dark rusty-brown colour, which varied to nearly black, amongst the ordinary Jackdaws. So when I got back to London I made enquiries of one or two well-known ornithologists, the late Mr. Dresser being one of them, but I could not get any information about these curious brown Jackdaws. I also spoke to Mr. Whitaker of Palermo on the subject, but, if my memory serves me right, he said he had never heard of them; he may, however, have made further investigations since, and if so it would be of great interest to ornithologists to have his valuable opinion on this subject. Why should some of these birds be brown and others black; and if they are young birds that are brown, why should the young Jackdaws at home not sometimes be brown? I have never heard of or seen a brown Jackdaw in this country.

It is strange that Mr. C. Dixon, in his article on the "Birds of the Province of Constantine" (*Ibis*, 1882, vol. vi. 4th ser. p. 576, under *Corvus monedula*), should have passed unnoticed these brown Jackdaws, which are so conspicuous. He notes that the ordinary species is a common inhabitant of the rocks of Constantine.

Since writing above I have just come across a most interesting article by Lord Rothschild and Mr. Hartert entitled "Ornithological Explorations of Algeria," published in 'Novitates Zoologicæ,' vol. xviii. for 1911, and under *Colæus monedula cirtensis* they write as follows:—

"We saw a great many Jackdaws in Constantine, where they were breeding in the stupendous gorge of the Rummel, but were not able to obtain specimens. A large proportion showed the brown, apparently unmoulted quills generally seen in young birds, and they were shining quite rufous in the sun."

Yours very truly,

W. H. WORKMAN.

Lismore, Windsor,  
Belfast.

23 August, 1917.

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#### Australian Parrots.

SIR,—Having taken a keen interest in Australian Parrots for some years, and kept and bred a large number of species in this country, both at liberty and in confinement, I send a few notes and criticisms on Mr. Mathews' book, which I hope will not be out of place from a naturalist who has never visited Australia.

In the recent volumes of the 'Birds of Australia' external sexual differences are sometimes passed over in a way one would not expect in a work of such detail. "Female resembles adult male" gives one an idea of two birds as exactly alike as, for instance, a male and female Lorikeet, but this is often misleading. No mention is made of the striking difference in the colour of the eye in male and female Roseate and Leadbeater's Cockatoos, and no mention is made of the "spatules" on the male Queen

Alexandra Parrakeet's primaries nor of the different shade of the rump and crown of the head. The females of all *Platycercus* and *Barnardius* Parrakeets are inferior to adult males of the same race in the size of the head and beak, and some are duller in colour and slightly different in markings. The latter peculiarity is only noticed in the case of *P. flaviventris*, where, curiously enough, it is least obvious.

The statement that the adult female Stanley (yellow-checked) Parrakeet resembles the male is quite incorrect. The female differs from all other *Platycerci* in retaining all her life a plumage very similar to that of the young. I must have seen nearly four dozen Stanleys, and have kept them and bred them for years. I may say here that I do not believe any *Platycercine* Parrakeet takes more than fourteen months to assume adult plumage: all that I have had, imported or home-bred, caged or free, have assumed full colour with the first complete moult and have not altered perceptibly afterwards. There is often, however, a considerable modification of the nestling plumage *before* the first complete moult, which begins about twelve months from the time the bird left the nest. Black Cockatoos do, however, take about four years to attain the adult dress. Two males of the small western race of the Banksian, which came into my possession three years ago, passed through various phases of plumage. On arrival they were spotted on the head and shoulders, and their tail-bars were yellow and freckled with black. In the next phase the spots were fewer and the tail-bars entirely red with black freckles. In the last, previous to the assumption of full adult dress, the black freckling disappeared entirely from the tail and only a very few spots persisted on the shoulders. A young female of the same age as the males closely resembled them at first, though they were always a little darker. Her yellow markings are now much brighter than they were, and I should say she was in adult dress quite twelve months before her companions.

The classification of *Platycercus adelaidæ* as merely a local race of *Platycercus elegans* seems hardly justifiable,



as it bears no closer resemblance to that bird than to *P. flaveolus*. It is, of course, just possible that it is a hybrid between *P. elegans* and *P. flaveolus* (a matter which Australian naturalists might determine by breeding the cross in confinement), but *P. adelaide* differs from *P. elegans* both in adult and immature dress. The call-note is rather different, and when kept at liberty the two species show no particular tendency to associate, while *P. elegans* is of a far more wandering and migratory disposition than its relative.

In conclusion, I should like to ask whether naturalists confirm the theory held by some Australian bird-fanciers, that adult females of *P. eximius* may always be distinguished from adult males by the retention of white spots on some of the flight-feathers?

Y.M.C.A., Victoria Barracks,  
Portsmouth.

2 September, 1917. \_\_\_\_\_

Yours truly,

TAVISTOCK.

#### Moult of Owl's beaks.

SIR,—I wonder whether any observations have been made on the shedding of the tip of the upper mandible by the Little Owl (*Carine noctua*) when in a wild state. I have kept these birds in confinement for many years, and noticed that the first bird I kept always lost the tip of the upper mandible—which by that time had grown rather long—in August or September. At first I thought that this might only be a coincidence, but subsequently I found that other individuals also regularly shed the tip of the mandible at the same time of year. I am inclined to think, therefore, that the autumn shedding of the tip of the upper mandible is just as much a habit as the shedding of the nails is with Grouse.

The break takes place very neatly, the new tip being perfectly shaped from the first.

Y.M.C.A., Portsmouth.  
13 September, 1917. \_\_\_\_\_

Yours truly,

TAVISTOCK.

## Nesting of the Sparrow-Hawk.

SIR,—I have read with great pleasure Mr. E. Stuart Baker's interesting paper on the Nesting of some Indian Sparrow-Hawks. I hope he will not mind my criticising a statement he makes on p. 352 of the July number of 'The Ibis.' In the second paragraph he states: "Like its nearest relation, the English Sparrow-Hawk, this little Hawk nearly always, if not invariably, uses the deserted nest of another bird in which to lay its eggs." My experience of our Sparrow-Hawk is that it always builds its own nest, and *never* appropriates that of any other bird. It builds an extremely suitable nest for its requirements, and only uses it once; and although the same pair—or if one of them be lost, a pair—will resort to the same part of a wood for many years for purposes of nesting, a new nest is invariably built. The Kestrel will use an old Sparrow-Hawk's nest occasionally, and on several occasions I have had one sitting within fifty yards of a Sparrow-Hawk who had built that nest the year before, and I once knew a Hobby use an old Sparrow-Hawk's nest, but it must be extremely unusual for a Sparrow-Hawk to use the deserted nest of another bird. I find by my notes I have recorded no fewer than 481 cases of Sparrow-Hawks building their own nests, and not one to the contrary. I think my experience is borne out by many others. On one occasion we had three Sparrow-Hawks' nests in one tree, not built in successive years, but the work of one pair of birds.

Yours truly,

Hever Warren,  
Hever, Kent.

E. G. B. MEADE-WALDO.

8 September, 1917.

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Nesting in Macedonia.

The following extract from a letter and a list of nests and eggs obtained in Macedonia has been received from Col. G. van H. Clarke, M.B.O.U., and is dated June 3, 1917.



We are indebted to Col. Stephenson Clarke, to whom it was addressed, for permission to publish it :—

We have been bundled out of Salonika and are once more *en route* for Egypt and I suppose Palestine ; we shall no doubt get more active work, but I am very sorry to leave Macedonia, a paradise for birds and flowers and the country now at its best. I have been egging hard, and send you a catalogue of my collection in case it interests you. The birds seem to breed much the same time as they do in England. The Nightingale, though it arrives early, seems to breed late ; the Hoopoe arrives very early (March 19) and also breeds early. I failed to get eggs, as I expected them to breed in holes in trees, whereas they breed here in heaps of stone on the summit of lonely hills, and I found a nest with well-grown young on May 21. Rollers are very common, and breed in trees or banks ; all my nests were in trees. I only came across two pairs of Golden Orioles in a wide neighbourhood ; they are very noisy birds and their note carries a long way. Bee-eaters are fairly common, but scattered. The Rose-coloured Pastor arrived on May 24 ; the Black-headed Bunting on April 29 and by May 7 was very common everywhere. The Little Bustard is common and nested close to camp. We had several Corn-Buntings' nests in camp. Hobbies are numerous, but had not laid. I saw one or two pairs of Red-footed Falcon at the end of April, but none afterwards. There were eleven nests of Lesser Grey Shrike within half a mile of my tent, and three others a little further off ; they seem to breed in community, as I found none breeding elsewhere. I knew of one pair of Woodchats. The Red-backed Shrike is very common, but I failed completely to find a nest. Whitethroats swarm ; I found over twenty nests. Cuckoos are common, but I found no eggs. I was defeated by the Wood-Larks and Ortolans, both fairly common, and I wasted hours over them. Several Spanish Sparrows were nesting, but the only two possible to get at some idiots pulled down.

Had we not been ordered off, I was making an expedition to Lake Langaza and hoped to get a lot of water-birds. I saw four Black Storks on the march down to Salonika, but did not have time to go back to look for their nests. Cetti's Warbler is abundant, but I could not find a nest; they live in impenetrable jungles of bramble.

*List of nests obtained.*

Imperial Eagle.—March 17 & 20; 2 eggs. April 5; 2 eggs. April 18; 2 eggs.

White-tailed Eagle.—April 20; 2 eggs.

Long-eared Owl.—April 2; 5 eggs. April 14; 1 egg. (Two other nests found.)

Little Owl.—April 18; 5 eggs. May 25; 3 eggs.

Scops Eared Owl.—May 21; 3 eggs.

Kite.—April 10; 2 eggs. April 11; 3 eggs. April 14, three nests; 2, 2, 1 egg.

Marsh Harrier.—April 24; 5 eggs.

Kestrel.—April 10, three nests; 4, 5, 5 eggs. April 11; 4 eggs. April 14; 6 eggs. April 30, two nests; 5, 4 eggs. May 10; 5 eggs.

Lesser Kestrel.—May 13, four nests; 4, 4, 2, 5 eggs. May 14, four nests; 4, 1, 1, 3 eggs. May 18, two nests; 2, 3 eggs. May 20; 1 egg. May 24; 4 eggs. May 25; 5 eggs.

Raven.—March 30; 6 eggs.

Grey Crow.—April 11; 1 egg. April 14, two nests; 4, 2 eggs. April 23; 5 eggs.

Starling.—May 14; 3 eggs.

Jackdaw.—April 22; 3 eggs.

Magpie.—April 5; 6 eggs. April 26; 6 eggs.

Crested Lark.—April 9; 4 eggs. April 14; 4 eggs. April 20; 4 eggs. April 23; 5 eggs. April 24; 5 eggs. May 20, two nests; 6, 5 eggs.

Calandra Lark.—April 20; 5 eggs. May 1; 5 eggs. May 2; 4 eggs. May 5; 6 eggs. May 8, two nests; 5, 5 eggs. May 11, three nests; 3, 5, 6 eggs. May 15; 3 eggs (out of 6). May 18; 2 eggs.

Short-toed Lark.—May 8; 2 eggs. May 15; 3 eggs. May 27; 6 eggs.

Black-throated Chat.—April 22; 4 eggs. May 6; 4 eggs.

Black-eared Chat.—April 29; 4 eggs.

Penduline Titmouse.—April 24; 7 eggs.

Girl Bunting.—April 18; 4 eggs. April 25; 3 eggs. May 4; 4 eggs. May 13; 5 eggs. May 19; 3 eggs.

- Corn-Bunting.—April 21; 3 eggs. April 29; 4 eggs. April 30, two nests; 3, 5 eggs. May 6; 5 eggs. May 8; 5 eggs. May 11, two nests; 6, 5 eggs. A nest with 7 eggs found on May 31.
- Black-headed Bunting.—May 20, two nests: 5, 4 eggs. May 25; 5 eggs.
- Tree-Sparrow.—April 22; 5 eggs. May 6; 3 eggs. May 11; 1 egg. May 22; 5 eggs.
- House-Sparrow.—May 19; 5 eggs.
- Whitethroat.—April 22; 5 eggs. May 11; 5 eggs. May 24; 5 eggs.
- Lesser Grey Shrike.—May 15; 5 eggs. May 16, four nests; 7, 2, 6, 3 eggs.
- Kingfisher.—April 24; 6 eggs.
- Roller.—May 19; 1 egg. May 22; 2 eggs. May 23; 1 egg. May 25, two nests; 4, 5 eggs.
- Bee-eater.—May 24, two nests; 2, 1 egg. May 29, two nests; 4, 5 eggs.
- Golden Oriole.—May 25; 2 eggs.
- Nightingale.—May 25; 2 eggs.
- Olivaceous Warbler.—May 23; 3 eggs.
- Stone Curlew.—May 23; 2 eggs.
- Little Ringed Plover.—May 28; 4 eggs. May 29, two nests; 3, 2 eggs.
- Little Bustard.—May 18; 4 eggs. May 19; 4 eggs.
- White Stork.—April 18; 1 egg (out of 3).
- Turtle-Dove.—May 20; 2 eggs.